



AGENDA
Kuwait City, Kuwait

Kuwait: Open the Doors

For our Kuwait issue we explore all the elements of culture. Architecture, design, music and contemporary art all take centre stage in our exploration of this tiny Gulf state



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When people who haven't been are faced with the prospect of imagining what Kuwait is like, they often are stumped. They may picture burning oil wells from the Gulf War, the (Swedish-designed) Kuwait Towers or a derivative version of Saudi Arabia - iconic images but certainly not intimate ones. The irony of Kuwait's benign but clichéd reputation is that everything great about Kuwait is indeed intimate; hidden literally and figuratively underground in basements, diwanias, chalets, warehouses and holes in the wall.

Kuwait's political climate is equally responsible for its insularity. The entire country essentially shutdown in 2004 when the US invaded Iraq and the parliament has broken up five times in six years. The country continues to work on issues of internal unity and perhaps hasn't directed as much strategic attention to their foreign policy as their neighbours, so it is not surprising little is known about it.

However there is plenty to occupy even the most active of souls. On any given day you could take a morning swim by the prime minister's house, have brunch at an architect's studio, watch a Cinemagic film screening on a Salmiya rooftop and dance at a beach party on the southern coast. There are also plenty of people with diverse missions to meet in Kuwait and foreign diplomats, cultural workers, professors and their socially active spouses make up a large part of the population. Perhaps most fabulous of all are Kuwait's locals, whose winning combination of strong family values, unparalleled social skills and a penchant for travel add up to a worldly and friendly crew.

New York and Paris-educated architects, artists and designers are a growing population in Kuwait, with the government's subsidisation of higher education being consistently put to use by eager students. Shuwaikh Industrial area is their new creative playground, a part of town where off-beat galleries, boutiques and studios can be found. Amongst the major attractions in the area are 4 Boutique an edgy concept store, The November Company, which specialises in fabulous event design, regularly featuring young designers, Arabana, an architecture and design complex and Contemporary Art Platform, a dynamic art space.

Longstanding art establishments in the country are Sultan Gallery (est. 1969), which is run by the feisty Farida Sultan, whom art critic and curator Isabella Hughes refers to as Kuwait's national treasure. Sultan represents artists from the region such as Jawhara Al Saud, Beirut's Atfal Ahdath and artist sisters Monira and Fatima Al Qadiri. Other notable arts patrons include Rana Sadik, founder of MinRasy Projects, and Abdul Latif Al-Hamad, president of the Arab Fund - the Fund's art collection is open to the public and is definitely worth a visit.

Dar Al Athar al-Islamiyyah, founded by Sheikha Hessa Al-Sabah, is an institution whose exhibitions and education programs about Islamic art have titillated audiences for almost thirty years - niche lectures such as Parviz Tanavoli on pre-Islamic sculptures and workshops such as the most recent one on calligraphy, definitely keep both young and old busy and educated.



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FACT BOX

* Kuwait comprises of nine islands: Auhha, Bubiyan, Failaka, Kubbar, Miskan, Umm Al Maradim, Umm Al Naml, Qaruh and Warba

* The tiny state has the world's fifth largest proven oil reserves

* Kuwait is the fourth richest country in the world in terms of per capita income.

* It has less than 300 species of native flowering plant

* Kuwait was the first Arab country in the Gulf to have an elected parliament

* It covers approximately 18,000 sq km of land

As for performance arts, the past year of dazzling performances, documentary screenings and theatre workshops by Sabab theatre have kept aficionados of the stage happy and local musicians are blossoming.

Kuwait's film scene has also received growing attention lately with local directors Meqdad Al-Kout and Dana Mojil both receiving international awards for their work.

But probably the most satisfying national pastime, is the Kuwait food experience. More refined tastes are sated in the ever-popular sushi restaurant Edo, whose classically contemporary décor, consistently fresh fish, and regular jazz nights keep it in constant favour. Other culinary constants are Al Mursa, a Kuwaiti fish restaurant with live oud music at lunchtime and the authentic Indian food found in a number of places including Soul & Spice at the Marriott Hotel, Bokhara in the Sheraton and in the Mughal Mahal and Taa, both popular chain restaurants

At this point in the Kuwait restaurant business, it's not the traditional Persian and Indian-inspired machbous and biryani that define sought-after tastes. Most dishes flying off the Kuwait menus come deliciously deep-fried with a mayo-based dip; particularly adept at the culinary art of artery clogging are Seif Palace-side restaurants such as Slider Station and Pizetta, where the teenage-filled atmosphere is just as heavy with longing as the food.

Whether it is cuisine or culture, art or architecture, scratch beneath the surface and you will find Kuwait has it all and in some cases, much more than you might expect.

